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ABSTRACT

Current proposals for national testing are either for national multiple-choice tests in which all students would take the same test or for a system of performance-based examinations calibrated to national standards. The Bush administration's proposals, as enunciated in "America 2000," embrace both types, beginning with administration of the mostly multiple-choice National Assessment of Educational Progress, and eventually replacing these tests with the performance-based American Achievement Tests, which have yet to be developed. The Campaign for Genuine Accountability in Education (CGAE), led by FairTest, opposes national testing in general, and the Bush proposals in particular. An attached fact sheet summarizes reasons why a national examination will not help low-income and minority-group students, asserting that: (1) the Bush plan includes no resources for educational improvement; (2) there are inadequate resources committed to develop and implement a performance-based assessment system; (3) proposals are speeding up the test development process dangerously; and (4) the proposals call for continued reliance on tests to make decisions about students with unclear consequences for those who do not pass the tests. Recommendations for reform in each of these areas are included. Attachments include facsimiles of two newspaper articles on national testing, a sample letter from the FairTest CGAE to a congress member, and an outline of criteria for evaluating student assessment systems. (SLD)

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FACT SHEET ON NATIONAL TESTING PROPOSALS

National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest)

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FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Fact Sheet on National Testing Proposals

August 1991

A variety of proposals for national testing or national examination systems now exist. Current national testing proposals are of two sorts: national multiple-choice tests in which all students would take the same tests, and a system of performance-based exams all "calibrated" to national standards. The latter has been advanced, in particular, by the National Center for Education and the Economy, headed by Marc Tucker, and the Learning Research and Development Center, directed by Lauren Resnick, which have formed the New Standards Project.

The Bush Administration's proposals, as enunciated by the President and Education Secretary Alexander in *America 2000: An Education Strategy*, embrace both types. For an undetermined interim period, they propose administering individualized versions of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for all students in grades 4, 8 and 12. These exams would be mostly multiple-choice. (The group Educate America has also proposed this sort of testing.) The Administration has proposed legislation to lift the prohibitions on the use of NAEP below the state level (i.e., to allow districts and schools to be tested) and to allow individual students to be ranked, hence individualized tests to be constructed. The NAEP proposals are likely to be considered by Congress this fall.

According to *America 2000*, once the standards and performance-based exams are developed, the individualized NAEP would be replaced by American Achievement Tests. These are to be developed by the National Education Goals Panel, which is considering adopting a variation of the plans of the New Standards Project.

The Bush Administration has claimed that it does not need Congressional authorization to spend money to develop national tests. For activities wholly or largely related to testing in the coming fiscal year, Secretary Alexander has requested a total of $41.5 million more than Bush's original education budget. Leaders of the House Education and Labor Committee have argued, however, that the Administration does need separate authorization. As of late June, it appears that the House Appropriations Committee will not fund *America 2000* proposals that are not Congressionally authorized.

The national examination system proposal from the New Standards Project calls for developing national standards in a variety of subject areas. Once standards are developed, the Project will develop model examinations. States and districts will be encouraged to use the standards to develop curricula and to use the model exams to develop local exams based on the curricula. The Project would assure that the various exams met the national standards and would "calibrate" the scores to the standards and thus to each other. The Project is currently working with some 20 districts and states to develop the standards. The Project envisions colleges and employers using the exams as a selection device.

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Fact Sheet on National Testing Proposals -- 2

The National Education Goals Panel, created following the Education Summit between Bush and the Governors in September 1989, is considering methods to assess progress toward the Summit's six educational goals. Lauren Resnick chairs a committee of the Panel which recommended development of a national examination system. In June, the Goals Panel established an Interim Council on Standards and Testing to recommend plans necessary to establish education standards and national testing.

Later in June, Congress authorized creation of a Council on Standards and Testing, to report back to Congress and the Goals Panel by December 31, 1991. The Council is to study the desirability and feasibility of national standards and testing. The Administration and Congress reached agreement on creation of a Council by agreeing to the Congress' purpose (desirability and feasibility), and including the Goals Panel Council's membership but expanding it by 12 persons appointed by Congress. In August, the Council voted to support development of a national examination system based upon national standards, thereby rejecting the idea of developing individualized NAEP tests.

Earlier this year, both branches of Congress held hearings on national testing. Senator Pell has introduced legislation to create a mandatory national test, but his bill is not part of the Democrats omnibus education packages. One Democrat package, Senate Bill 2, includes provisions to establish a body which might replace the Goals Panel in supervising progress toward educational goals.

Dozens of national and local civil rights, education, and advocacy organizations have expressed opposition to national testing. Many witnesses before Congress have criticized the various national testing proposals on both educational and equity grounds.

The Campaign for Genuine Accountability in Education, led by FairTest, has released statements in opposition to national testing in general and Bush's proposals in particular. In June, the Campaign released an Open Letter to Congress urging Congress to neither fund nor authorize the Administration's testing proposals.

Other organizations have also stated opposition to or strong concerns about national testing. The National Education Association voted opposition to national testing in July at their annual assembly. In August, the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association and the National Council on Measurement in Education issued a joint statement urging caution and a go-slow approach to a national examination system because too much remains unknown about use of performance assessments on a large scale.

For further information about national testing proposals and the growing opposition to national testing, contact FairTest.

FairTest
National Center for Fair & Open Testing

WILL A NATIONAL EXAMINATION SYSTEM HELP LOW INCOME AND MINORITY-GROUP STUDENTS?

Proponents of a national examination system claim that performance-based national assessments, based on national standards, will help improve education for all U.S. schoolchildren. If this claim were accurate, advocates of education reform, particularly those who represent poor children and children of color, should support the proposals.

FairTest has serious doubts that, in practice, a new assessment system will meet the goal of improving learning outcomes for all our children. This paper discusses four pitfalls of current proposals and recommendations to address them.

Problem 1: The Bush plan includes no resources for educational improvement. The assumption underlying national testing is that standards and exams will lead students to work harder and can be used to pressure schools to improve education. But students may drop out, not work harder, if the standards are not meaningful to them or if they are used inappropriately. And unless schools have adequate resources, they won't really be able to improve sufficiently, even if they try.

For all children to receive a quality education, our nation must commit to reconstructing education. We need new and improved curricula, teaching methods, instructional materials and assessments, with massive staff development to make these changes happen. And we need inclusion of parents, community people, teachers and students in decision-making. Children also should be entitled to adequate food, clothing, shelter and medical care, so they come to school ready to learn.

Just as farmers cannot fatten cattle by weighing them, we cannot improve education simply by testing children. Current testing proposals, however, make no effort to assure that the other equally necessary reforms are implemented, or that the results of testing will be used to improve education. Indeed, the focus on testing may distract from comprehensive school reform efforts. Unless the other elements for reconstructing education are also put in place, we will end up administering new assessments for which students and teachers are unprepared.

Children from low-income and minority-group backgrounds will still be least ready to pass the exams. The consequences for these students could be devastating.

Recommendation: Supporters of improved schooling should join the FairTest-initiated Campaign for Genuine Accountability in Education and oppose national individual, "high stakes" testing unless and until the other necessary elements of a high quality education -- particularly curriculum and staff development -- are put in place for all children. The Federal government must commit the necessary resources to provide all students a fair opportunity to pass the exams.

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Problem 2: Inadequate resources to develop and implement a performance-based assessment system. To conduct performance-based examinations and assess portfolios and products in five subjects for all students in grades 4, 8 and 12 will cost a great deal. Exactly how much, no one knows, partly because it has never been done, and partly because costs will depend on the nature of the assessments. "Calibration" will be particularly expensive.

But our nation's elected leaders have not been willing to spend adequate resources on existing programs that work, such as WIC and Head Start. Why should anyone assume adequate resources will be available to fund a complex national system of performance-based assessments?

The danger is that instead of a good performance-based system, funding shortfalls -- coupled with current knowledge limitations about constructing large-scale performance-based assessment systems -- will cause the system to be reduced to a caricature of what it should be. Due to the importance of these tests, teachers will teach to them, no matter how flawed they might be. Weak tests will continue to ensure a weak curriculum.

Recommendation: Groups must insist that if there is to be a national assessment system, only an excellent one will do. A poor or mediocre system will undermine educational improvement efforts. New assessment systems should be developed carefully and field-tested in districts and states. In particular, national tests for individuals must not be based on the mostly multiple-choice National Assessment of Educational Progress, as the Administration proposes to do until performance-based exams are readied.

Problem 3: Administration proposals are dangerously speeding up the test-development process. Clear, comprehensive and fair standards are important parts of good educational programs, as are good assessments. Yet the Goals Panel suggests allowing only a few years to develop these standards. Model exams would immediately follow. States would then use the standards and model exams to develop their own curricula and exams. This scheme has two basic problems.

First, developing high-quality standards will require more time and broader participation than the Bush Administration and the Goals Panel seem to allow. Science teachers, for example, plan to take four years to develop national science standards. Widespread participation, particularly given the very diverse cultural makeup of the US, is critical. Does the commitment really exist to make participation widespread and to take the time necessary to do the job well?

Second, good assessment must be based on a good curriculum. But how can anyone be sure that a national curriculum, quickly developed without widespread public participation or introduced in a backdoor manner through the test development process, will be sound? Too often, the curriculum has excluded, denigrated and been inaccessible to low-income children and people of color.

Recommendation: Support the careful development of standards, provided there is wide, grassroots participation, particularly of people who historically have been excluded. Groups should oppose the backdoor implementation of a national curriculum through testing and use of exams developed without thorough local and state debate.

Problem 4: Continued reliance on tests to make decisions about students, with unclear consequences for those who do not pass. National assessment planning calls for students to pass performance-based exams in order to obtain a certificate, which would be used for college admissions and employment. While some plans call for a combination of examinations and other assessment methods, such as portfolios and products, the danger remains that states will require students to pass a one-time event -- a test -- to obtain a certificate. But no test is sufficiently reliable and valid that it should serve as a sole determinant of a student's future. Moreover, sufficient knowledge about overcoming potential bias in performance-based assessment has not yet been accumulated through experience at state and district levels to ensure unbiased assessment methods are used.

Proponents of national assessment say their proposals will yield only positive consequences for students. Students will have multiple opportunities to pass and can take as long as they need to do so. Unfortunately, programs providing such "second-chance" opportunities are rarely available in US schools.

Students who fail their initial attempts to pass will continue to be likely drop-outs. Failure to get a certificate will, in fact, carry serious negative consequences. The lack of resources to ensure equal opportunity and continued reliance on one-time tests would ensure that poor and minority students will continue to be unfairly penalized for factors beyond their control.

Recommendation: Student evaluation systems should rely primarily on portfolios and projects. These performance-based assessments allow students to demonstrate competence over time and are not dependent on what happens on a single day. Methods to guard against bias can and should be built into a portfolio and product system. Decisions about individual students should not be made on the basis of a single test score. Rather, students should be able to meet standards in different ways, as well as have multiple opportunities to meet them.

Conclusion. The U.S. needs education reform, not just more testing. Programs that look good on paper and are wrapped in good intentions may turn into their opposite if inadequately funded and poorly implemented. Simplistic exams, designed by a centralized and remote authority, could lead to imposition of a curriculum that fails to engage children and seriously damages our most vulnerable students. There is great danger this will happen to current national assessment proposals.

The preconditions for good uses of assessment and quality education for all students must be developed before or together with implementation of new assessment systems. Development of quality systems at state and local levels and commitment of adequate funding must precede any decision to implement a national assessment system. Any other approach, no matter how it is packaged, is still "just more testing."

A national examination system by itself will not make schools better. Groups concerned with quality education for all students should stay focused on that goal, not get distracted by proposals that ignore many real problems of our schools.

The Washington Post

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 12, 1991 B

Exams Opposed Over Potential Harm to Minorities

School Groups Urge Congress to Hold Off Administration Plan for Voluntary National Tests

By Kenneth J. Cooper
Washington Post Staff Writer

A coalition of groups representing school administrators, minority groups and parents urged Congress yesterday to withhold legislative approval to implement President Bush's call for a voluntary system of national examinations.

Bush's education strategy, released in April, called for states to give comparable exams in five subjects to every student in grades 4, 8 and 12. The "American Achievement Tests" would be tied to national achievement standards to be developed in English, mathematics, science, geography and history.

Representatives of the coalition argued that such national testing would serve no educational purpose and could limit the job and college opportunities available to minority and female students, who traditionally have scored lower on standardized tests. The last criticism was in response to Bush's suggestion that colleges use the test results in admissions and that employers consider them in hiring decisions.

"We don't believe there's any evidence that national testing will lead to better education," said Monty Neill, associate director of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, known as FairTest.

An Education Department spokeswoman suggested that the critics of national testing had ignored the link among national education goals, achievement standards and the proposed exams.

"The American Achievement Tests are by no means the only way to improve educational achievement," said Etta Fielek, the spokeswoman. "There's a much bigger picture than just testing."

FairTest has assembled a coalition, known as the Campaign for Genuine Accountability in Education, that wrote to members of Congress yesterday and urged them to "not authorize or appropriate funds for development of a national test or examination system at this time."

The coalition's members include the NAACP, National PTA, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and professional associations of school superintendents and principals.

The Bush administration has asked Congress to appropriate $17.4 million to support the development of national tests. Of that amount, $12.4 million would go to drafting achievement standards and the American Achievement Tests.

The remaining $5 million would be used to produce new versions of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, congressionally mandated tests given to sample groups of students. The administration has proposed using revised National Assessment exams in interim national testing to begin in 1993.

Education Department officials have maintained that they can begin to work on national testing under general authority to undertake research and school improvement projects. But Congress has prohibited the reporting of National Assessment scores below the state level—for school districts, schools or individual students.

Last week, the House Education and Labor Committee authorized spending $1 million for a study of national testing by a bipartisan panel. The Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee has deferred hearings on the issue until fall.

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Campaign for Genuine Accountability in Education

c/o FairTest, 342 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139

June 11, 1991

Dear Member of Congress:

President Bush has called for national tests of all U.S. school children in his America 2000 proposal. In response, the civil rights, parent, education, community and advocacy organizations who comprise the Campaign for Genuine Accountability in Education urge all members of Congress:

Do not authorize or appropriate funds for development of a national test or examination system at this time. Congress also should prohibit federal funds authorized for other purposes from being used to initiate a national test or examination system.

A national test would be one of the most fundamental changes ever in the federal role in education. Such an important policy decision should not be made without full, open debate by Congress and the public. The Senate and House should, however, support state and local efforts to develop and implement performance-based assessments. The Campaign does not oppose the development of national curricular frameworks, provided they are developed through an open, participatory process.

Specifically, we urge Congress to:

-- Not legislate the development of any national examination system. We support the development and wide implementation of performance-based assessment. However, the knowledge base does not yet exist to determine whether a national examination system of this sort is feasible. Nor do we yet know how to assure that a performance-based examination system will be fair to different racial, cultural, linguistic, gender and socio-economic groups, and students with disabilities.

The evidence demonstrates that we cannot simply mandate new tests -- without the requisite standards, curricula, instructional methods, staff development and financial support -- and expect positive change. Experience to date indicates that if the education of all children is to be improved, implementation of performance-based assessment systems requires massive staff development to enable teachers and administrators to appropriately use the new assessments. It also requires the development of new curricula and implementation of new teaching methods on which improved assessment must be based. This process of educational renewal requires substantial time and resources.

-- Reject any plan to use the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to create individualized tests or provide individual student-by-student scores. Currently, NAEP is the only uncorrupted source of national educational indicator information. That vital role should not be compromised.

President Bush's proposal implies the creation of separate individual NAEP examinations. Because of time and cost constraints, such exams most likely would be predominantly multiple-choice. Yet a national multiple-choice examination would cement in place many of the worst elements of current educational practice and undermine the progress of educational reform. Congress should, however, support the continued development of NAEP as a national matrix sample that employs an increasing percentage of performance-based tasks and open-ended items.

-- Support efforts of districts and states to develop and implement authentic, performance-based methods of assessment as part of wider efforts to reform curriculum and instruction and make a high quality education available to <u>all</u> our nation's children. Since many questions about large scale performance-based assessments are still unanswered, we conclude that the best way to proceed is to support their implementation at state and district levels in order to discover what works best, solve problems, and learn how to do a job that no nation on earth now does.

Currently, there are a number of efforts underway to accomplish these goals. Arizona, California, Connecticut, Kentucky and Vermont are among the states committed to implementing performance-based assessments. Many other states, districts and schools are beginning to move in this direction.

The Campaign for Genuine Accountability does not claim the US should never have a national examination system. Rather, we strongly conclude that at this time the only kind of examination we can implement will hurt, not help, education reform. Therefore, Congress should not legislate or fund national testing and should not allow the Administration to develop tests with appropriations intended for other purposes.

A list of signers is attached.

Campaign for Genuine Accountability in Education

Open Letter to Congress

List of Signers as of June 26, 1991

Organizational Signers

American Association of School Administrators
APPLE Corps, Inc. (Georgia)
Association for Women in Science
Center for Law and Education
Center for Women Policy Studies
Education Law Center, Inc. (New Jersey)
Massachusetts Advocacy Center
META, Inc.
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
Mississippi Human Services Agenda
National Alliance of Black School Educators
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
National Association for the Education of Young Children
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest)
National Coalition of Title I Chapter I Parents
National Council of La Raza
National Council for the Social Studies
National PTA
New York Public Interest Research Group
Panasonic Foundation
Partnership for Democracy
Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research (Vermont)
Prospect Heights High School Human Services Academy (New York)
Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund
Southern Association on Children Under Six

Individual Signers

Dr. Harold Dent, Psychological and Human Resource Consultants*
LaDonna Harris
Joseph Lowery, President, Southern Christian Leadership Conference*
Julia Reed Palmer
Chuck Stone, University of Delaware*

* Organization listed for identification purposes only.

THE NATIONAL FORUM ON ASSESSMENT
CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION OF STUDENT ASSESSMENT METHODS
Endorsements as of July 8, 1991

Organizational Signators

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Women
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families
ASPIRA Association, Inc.
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
California Teachers Association
Center for Collaborative Education
Center for Law and Education
Center for Women Policy Studies
Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (Univ. of Wisconsin)
Children's Defense Fund
Coalition for Quality Education
Community Studies, Inc.
Council for Basic Education
Council for Educational Development and Research
Council of Chief State School Officers
Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund
Federation of Organizations for Professional Women
Genesee Valley Developmental Learning Group
Hispanic Policy Development Project
The Institute for Learning and Teaching
Intercultural Development Research Association
International Reading Association
Jefferson County Public Schools (Kentucky)
Massachusetts Advocacy Center
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
Mississippi Human Services Agenda
NAACP
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
National Center for Fair and Open Testing
National Coalition for Sex Equity Educators
National Council for the Social Studies
National Coalition of Advocates for Students
National Council of La Raza
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National School Boards Association
National Women's Law Center
New York Public Interest Research Group
Organization of Chinese American Women
Panasonic Foundation
The Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research
Prospect Heights High School Human Services Academy
Rethinking Schools
Schools Without Walls (Rochester City School District)
Southern Association on Children Under Six
Whole Language Umbrella (University of Missouri)
Women's Law Project
The Women's Research and Education Institute

Individual Signators

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Howard Dent, Psychological and Human Resource Consultants*
Dr. Nicholas F. Dussault, Sheboygan Area School District (Wisconsin)*
Howard Gardner, Co-Director, Harvard Project Zero*
Pamela George, North Carolina Central University*
Rev. Dr. Joseph E. Lowery, Southern Christian Leadership Conference*
Deborah Meier, Central Park East Secondary School*
Fred M. Newmann, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, University of Wisconsin*
William L. Robinson
Chuck Stone, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*
Ronald T. Vera, Esq.
Emma Walton, Anchorage School District*

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CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION OF STUDENT ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

At all levels of education--individual, classroom, school, district, state, and nation--we need dependable information about what students are and are not learning. To meet this need, several groups have advanced proposals for new national assessment programs. Meanwhile, changes are also being made or suggested in state and local assessment systems.

The members of the education, civil rights, and advocacy communities who comprise the National Forum on Assessment support fundamental changes in assessment, but we believe that tests will not necessarily provide the kind of information that is needed. The Forum itself takes no position for or against a new national examination system.

Because assessment affects educational standards, instructional methods, curricula, school structure, and governance, assessment decisions should not be made without consideration of these factors. To provide guidelines for evaluating existing and proposed assessment systems at any level, we offer the following criteria:

1. Educational standards specifying what students should know and be able to do should be clearly defined before assessment procedures and exercises are developed.

For assessment information to be valid and useful, assessment must be based on a consensus definition of what students are expected to learn, and the expected level of performance, at various developmental stages. Such standards, which might also be called intellectual competencies, are not discrete pieces of information or isolated skills, but important abilities, such as the ability to solve various kinds of problems or to apply knowledge appropriately.

The standards should be determined through open discussion among subject-matter experts, educators, parents, policymakers, and others, including those concerned with the relationship between school learning and life outside of school. Without a consensus on standards, there is little likelihood of valid assessment.

2. The primary purpose of the assessment systems should be to assist both educators and policymakers to improve instruction and advance student learning.

Students, educators, parents, policymakers, and others have different needs for assessment and different uses for assessment information. For example, teachers, students and their parents want information on individual achievement, while policymakers and the public want information for accountability purposes. In all cases, the system should be designed to provide not just numbers or ratings, but useful information on the particular abilities students have or have not developed.

All purposes and uses of assessment should be beneficial to students. For example, the results should be used to overcome systemic inequalities. If assessments cannot be shown to be beneficial, they should not be used at all.

The *Criteria for Evaluation of Student Assessment Systems* has been endorsed by more than two dozen national civil rights and advocacy organizations. For a complete list of signers, or to endorse the Criteria, contact the National Forum on Assessment, c/o Council for Basic Education, 725 15th Street N.W., Washington, DC 20005.

3. Assessment standards, tasks, procedures, and uses should be fair to all students.

Because individual assessment results often affect students' present situation and future opportunities, the assessment system, the standards on which it is based, and all its parts must treat students equally. Assessment tasks and procedures must be sensitive to cultural, racial, class and gender differences, and to disabilities, and must be valid for and not penalize any groups. To ensure fairness, students should have multiple opportunities to meet standards and should be able to meet them in different ways. No student's fate should depend upon a single test score.

Assessment information should also be used fairly. It should be accompanied by information about access to the curriculum and about opportunities to meet the standards. Students should not be held responsible for inequities in the system.

4. The assessment exercises or tasks should be valid and appropriate representations of the standards students are expected to achieve.

A sound assessment system provides information about a full range of knowledge and abilities considered valuable and important for students to learn, and therefore requires a variety of assessment methods. Multiple-choice tests, the type of assessment most commonly used at present, are inadequate to measure many of the most important educational outcomes, and do not allow for diversity in learning styles or cultural differences. More appropriate tools include portfolios, open-ended questions, extended reading and writing experiences which include rough drafts and revisions, individual and group projects, and exhibitions.

5. Assessment results should be reported in the context of other relevant information.

Information about student performance should be one part of a system of multiple indicators of the quality of education. Multiple indicators permit educators and policymakers to examine the relationship among context factors (such as the type of community, socioeconomic status of students, and school climate), resources (such as expenditures per student, physical plant, staffing, and money for materials and equipment), programs and processes (such as curriculum, instructional methods, class size, and grouping), and outcomes (such as student performance, dropout rates, employment, and further education). Statements about educational quality should not be made without reference to this information.

6. Teachers should be involved in designing and using the assessment system.

For an assessment system to help improve learning outcomes, teachers must fully understand its purposes and procedures and must be committed to, and use, the standards on which it is based. Therefore teachers should participate in the design, administration, scoring and use of assessment tasks and exercises.

7. Assessment procedures and results should be understandable.

Assessment information should be in a form that is useful to those who need it--students, teachers parents, legislators, employers, postsecondary institutions, and the general public. At present, test results are often reported in technical terms that are confusing and misleading, such as grade-level equivalents, stanines, and percentiles. Instead, they should be reported in terms of educational standards.

8. The assessment system should be subject to continuous review and improvement.

Large-scale, complex systems are rarely perfect, and even well-designed systems must be modified to adapt to changing conditions. Plans for the assessment system should provide for a continuing review process in which all concerned participate.

EDUCATION WEEK

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Do We Need a National Achievement Exam?

No: It Would Damage, Not Improve, Education

By Monty Neill

U.S. policymakers are besieged with proposals for a national test or examination system. The plans range from a national multiple-choice exam to a complex system of exams which are to be calibrated to one another.

While the examination proposals have significant differences, all are based on the false premise that measurement by itself will produce positive change. Recent history shows this is not true: During the 1980's, U.S. schoolchildren became probably the most over-tested students in the world—but the desired educational improvements did not occur. FairTest research indicates that our schools now give more than 200 million standardized exams each year. The typical student must take several dozen before graduating. Adding more testing will no more improve education than taking the temperature of a patient more often will reduce his or her fever.

The proposals also share the assumption that the United States needs a national exam because our education system is failing to produce workers as skilled as those produced by economic competitors such as Japan and Germany. Education in this country does need major improvements, and not just for economic reasons. But neither Germany nor Japan has a national examination system of the sort being proposed for the United States. In fact, Germany does not even have a national curriculum. If these nations provide a better education to more of their children, it cannot be because they have national tests.

In response to the national-testing proposals, FairTest and over two dozen major education, civil-rights, and advocacy groups—including the National Education Association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National PTA, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the American Association of School Administrators, and the national associations of elementary- and secondary-school principals—released a statement urging "the Bush Administration and the Congress to support education reform by not implementing a national exam at this time." The organizations agree that mandating a national exam is premature at best and could lead to deepening educational disaster.

The scope of the potential damage is most clear in the Educate America proposal. That group seeks to administer a series of six tests to each high-school senior for $30 per student. It also claims its tests would be "state of the art" and include performance-based components. But the Scholastic Aptitude Test, which is entirely multiple-choice, costs $16 for just two tests. At the proposed price, the Educate America plan would have to be a multiple-choice test.

There can be no doubt that schools would be forced to teach to such a test. Yet organizing schooling around multiple-choice tests has been convincingly shown to do great damage to curriculum and instruction. The harm is greatest for students in the lower tracks whose schooling often is reduced to "drill and kill" to raise test scores. This method of instruction virtually guarantees they will not learn higher-order academic thinking skills.

Examination systems like those proposed by the University of Pittsburgh researcher Lauren Resnick and Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, do have positive features. Unlike Educate America, their plan calls for performance-based exams and would not be one-test-for-all. Its proponents recognize that we must develop educational standards before we implement an exam and they seem aware that assessment reform cannot be implemented without other educational changes, though the actual proposals fail to address this fact.

Indeed, assessment should be part of school reform—not the controlling force that national-

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A National Test? It Would Damage U.S. Education

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testing proposals make it. By focusing on assessment as the solution to our educational problems, we may well fail to address such critical issues as equity, rigid school governance, low-quality textbooks and curricula, inadequate schools of education, and a lack of useful information about school inputs, processes, and outcomes. To make real use of performance-based assessments requires creating performance-based schools, which in turn requires restructuring, staff development, and new educational materials.

Any national exam system should be based on national standards. The best current example is the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics' *Standards for Curriculum and Instruction*. Developing these standards took several years and involved substantial grassroots participation. There is no reason to believe standards in other subjects can be developed more quickly.

Then there is the even bigger problem of developing teachers' ability to implement the new standards. Teachers do not automatically know how to teach in a restructured environment, though a great many are willing to learn. We should build on their willingness, not dump a new assessment system on them, fail to provide adequate support, then penalize them and their students for not doing well.

FairTest is also concerned that these examinations could become a national gatekeeper that continues our nation's unfortunate history of unfairly sorting students by race and class. Barring additional changes, it is all too likely that districts will sort students according to their perceptions of how rapidly students will advance toward the "certificate of initial mastery" proposed by Lauren Resnick and Marc Tucker. Such sorting will not spur low-income and minority-group students to improved achievement.

On any exam, some students who fail should have passed. Experience shows that students from low-income and minority-group backgrounds will be disproportionately those who will suffer the negative consequences of false failures.

Exam proponents often say that they don't want to unfairly penalize students and that they support "second chance" systems. But why should we believe that "second chance" programs will be adequately implemented? We know WIC and Head Start work, but our nation does not fund them adequately.

> Adding more testing will no more improve education than taking the temperature of a patient more often will reduce his or her fever. . . . The harm [will be] greatest for students in the lower tracks, whose schooling often is reduced to "drill and kill" to raise test scores.

Performance-based assessments can be made reliable, sensitive to potential bias, and even helpful in addressing issues of bias. But work to assure these assessments are bias-free is only just beginning.

The proposals also leave key questions unanswered: Who will set the standards, develop the exams, and establish the scoring criteria? Imposing a national exam could lead, without adequate public discussion, to a national curriculum and an unelected de facto national school board that will erode democratic control of education and local accountability.

We do not even know whether it is feasible to construct such a national system. The whole process, particularly the calibration of possibly hundreds of different exams to each other, could prove to be too expensive and unwieldy to work. When the complexities become clear, the portfolios and projects necessary for performance-based assessment could end up being reduced to very limited exams. There could even be a return to multiple-choice tests, with all their well-known flaws.

Performance-based assessment methods can assess higher-order abilities and encourage good educational practices. However, we can move toward the national use of such assessments *without* constructing a national examination system. We then gain the advantages of good assessment and avoid the dangers of imposing a national testing system.

Assessment reform should be incorporated into systemic educational reconstruction at all levels. We must begin by defining the kind of education we want our children to have, including both their daily experiences and the outcomes society desires. On that basis, we can determine how to make the changes in curriculum, instruction, school governance and structure, and assessment required to reach educational goals far more comprehensive than those enunciated by the Bush Administration and the governors.

To do that, the pieces of a reform program must be organized into a coherent whole. Only after we have real experience in implementing the changes will we have the information necessary to make a reasoned decision about a national test. Once these reforms have taken hold in classrooms, schools, districts, and states, there may be no real need for the expense and complexity of a national exam system.

In the interim, we do need changes in assessment, as we need reform in all areas of education. For one, states and districts should stop the incessant, numbing, destructive multiple-choice testing most of them now engage in. They should develop and implement performance-based assessments, but do so while changing curricula, instructional methods and materials, ensuring the staff development of teachers and administrators required to make it work, and involving parents and other members of the community in the process.

The federal government should support improvement efforts that include assessment reform and that build consensus and change from the bottom up, with guidance—not dictates—from national organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics or bodies such as the National Goals Panel. Support for systemic educational reform would be a far better use of limited federal resources than imposing a national test or examination system would be.

Education can be dramatically improved over the next decade. Assessment reform is part of the way to make the changes, but it is not the magic key. Just testing without ensuring all the other necessary changes is a prescription for failure, a false short-cut that will actually undermine education reform. Public education in the United States can ill afford such an error. ■